

The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
KATHLEEN
BLISS

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FOR SEVERAL WEEKS this spring those of us who live in London had our eyes assailed in buses and tubes by the challenging announcement "The Christian Commandos are coming". Unlike other commandos they were evidently able to dispense with the element of surprise, and sure enough when, on April 14th, they finally came, the reception committee filled the Albert Hall to

welcome them. For ten days three thousand embattled champions attacked the religious apathy of the metropolis in a concerted effort. They came from all over the land and they spoke in shops and factories and clubs and pubs and film studios and theatres, not to say in churches. The B.B.C. arranged special services. Over a million leaflets were distributed. Special new editions of the New Testament were printed. *Picture Post*, *The Daily Mail* and a number of other papers featured the campaign. Most of the churches in the greater London area gave their active support, and operations were directed from the Central Hall, Westminster, by a large and powerful headquarters staff. It was magnificent. But was it war?

In one sense it definitely was not. The Commandos were not real commandos and they did not go in risk of their lives any more than they blackened their faces. It is a pity, to say the least of it, that this enterprise was given this absurdly unsuitable name. Even as a journalistic device it was irritating rather than effective and it contrived, most unjustly, to give a faint air of the comic and the cheaply sensational to what was a well-planned and

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responsible undertaking. It certainly succeeded in alienating many people who might otherwise have been sympathetic. Many who co-operated in the campaign expressed dislike of the name, but either got accustomed to it and forgot the impression which it first made on them or lacked the force and persistence to get it changed.

But while that needs saying, it must also be said that in another sense if this was not war it was something very much like it. It is a striking testimony to the resilience and conviction which remain in the Churches, and especially in the Methodist Church which took the initiative, that an attempt at evangelism so comprehensive and so intense as this should be made at the end of a long war when Church people are as tired and preoccupied as anyone else. The sheer effort of organization alone was terrific, and the energy required at this time of day to seek entry into innumerable factories and canteens and offices should not be underestimated. Any comment made about this enterprise must be set against the background of a realization that here at least is evidence of a fighting determination to speak boldly to this generation of the power of Christ. The Church may have many weaknesses but she is not dead.

THE NATURE OF CHRISTIAN COMMANDO CAMPAIGNS

The Christian Commando Campaigns were begun during the war by a group of Methodist ministers. Over seventy campaigns have already taken place in the last four years in different parts of the country and the London Campaign was the climax of a long series. Although they were started by the Methodists and largely financed and planned by the Methodist Church, other denominations have increasingly joined in. A book has been published which gives an account of the origins of the movement.¹

The Commandos claim that their distinctive feature is that they accept the fact that the people will not come to the churches, so that the churches will have to go to the people. Commando campaigns are, therefore, say the organizers, short, sharp attacks by powerful forces upon enemy occupied territory which aim to make the way of the regular troops easier. The Commandos,

¹ *These Christian Commando Campaigns*, by Colin A. Roberts, price 5s. (Epworth Press.)

who are generally small teams of ministers with an occasional layman, visit the places where people work and play and try to obtain hearings for themselves. In a factory, for example, the procedure is to obtain permission from both management and men to come into the canteen to make a series of short statements to those present, often against a distracting background of clattering crockery and people passing in and out. A straw vote is taken to see whether a religious brains trust is desired on the following day. If this is agreed to and the meeting held, the contacts made as a result of it are followed up during the rest of the Campaign. We are told that in the London campaign these contacts were particularly successful and that over 200 factories have asked local ministers and clergy to act as regular chaplains to them.

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE LONDON CAMPAIGN

To attempt an evaluation of the Commando campaigns would be outside our province and our competence. We have, however, dealt from time to time with the question of evangelism in modern England and from the point of view of that discussion certain observations about the London campaign present themselves.

First, those who took part in the campaign were almost unanimous in asserting that people were much more ready than they had imagined to listen to them with interest and respect. This conclusion does not appear to be the fruit of wishful thinking. One young minister confessed that he had embarked upon the enterprise with a faint heart and many misgivings about the reception they would get, and that he was constantly surprised by the readiness of people to offer serious personal questions. There does seem to be widespread evidence that people are more disturbed and unsettled in mind by the events of recent years than is frequently allowed and are ready enough to listen to a positive message. That is not to say, however, as the Commandos discovered, that they are ready to come to church in any large numbers. As one who took part in the campaign said, "Only a very small minority were willing to come out and declare themselves in the way they were appealed to to do, but a great many are obviously looking for something and are a little

surprised to find Christianity spiritually forceful and intellectually formidable. Their impressions of the Church are as low as they could be”.

This leads to the second point. The Commando Campaign's primary aim was to open new doors for the Church. As such it has evidently achieved considerable success on some levels. At the same time, as those who participated in it saw clearly enough, the effort is of little use unless those doors are entered. Such campaigns as these have their justification provided we realize their strict limitation and the fact that they are only one step in a long process. The C.N-L. has frequently spoken of the present as a time of “cultural crisis”. That means, among other things, not only that men have difficulty in understanding the Gospel when they hear it, but that even when they are converted it is very difficult for their conversion to be sustained in an environment which at so many points denies the world of the Gospel. One leader of the Commando Campaigns, in discussing the problem of the “follow-up”, said that spiritual babies were often born in refrigerators so that it was no wonder that they quickly died. But it is by no means only because of coldness on the part of church people that this happens. It is because the Church herself in relation to society has not yet achieved a sufficiently relevant and clearly-defined pattern of spiritual discipline to keep converts firmly in the way. Once more, this is not to say that efforts like the Commando Campaign are not worth while. They are, provided it is realized that they are not the only nor the most characteristic form of evangelism which our time needs. A five-minute talk in a cinema or even a Brains Trust in a factory lunch-hour are an invaluable point of contact. But the wayward and bewildered men and women of this generation can ultimately only be brought back to the Gospel by those who live alongside them and give themselves freely to them and who share with them the attempt to lead a Christian life in a secularized society.

This needs emphasizing in view of the fact that a surprising amount of what was said in the course of the Campaign appears to have overlooked it. It was not an intellectual highbrow standing aloof, but a man of impeccable Evangelical background engaged in promoting the campaign, who said of the Albert Hall

meeting, "This is the stuff I used to hear thirty years ago ; it is not what is needed to make any impact on people to-day." Fortunately, the Albert Hall meeting turned out to be by no means representative of the Campaign as a whole, but a great deal of the message of the campaign was that of the old-fashioned "Come to Jesus" appeal, with little reference either to the rule of God over all life or to the relation of the Church to the Gospel. The Commandos went to the people, but in many cases that was interpreted in a strictly geographical sense. Going to the people means seeing things as they see them, and there trying to speak to them from within their situation and in ways they can follow, of the Christ of Scripture and the Church, who is alone the saving Christ. The Commandos who tried to do that, and not those who had a ready answer to every question, are likely to have been those whose results were most lasting.

Three other points are worth mentioning. First, there is abundant evidence that the Campaign was a notable experience of Christian co-operation. Representatives of various denominations not only spoke together on the same platform but worked together as a team, and this made a deep impression on many who listened, because it is still widely imagined that the relations between Churches in this land exist on the level of unlimited competition. At the same time, it would be seriously misleading to regard this as a typical example of what is meant by oecumenical co-operation. It began with a Methodist initiative and was dominated more than Methodists probably realize by their own distinctive conception of the method and content of evangelism. This is not a criticism. Such forms of co-operation have their place and it is right that Churches should support each other in the activities which particular Churches are able to do best. But it would do harm to the oecumenical movement if it were assumed that efforts of this kind were to be a typical form of interdenominational co-operation. It is untrue to say, as the *Church Times* alleges, that there was no positive message given about the Church during the campaign but, because it was never defined, there was a tendency in some places to under-emphasize the relationship between churchmanship and Christianity and to slur over in a haze of good fellowship difficult and delicate questions like the future ecclesiastical affiliations of new converts.

Secondly, to put it in the words of a correspondent who took an active part, "the great regret of the campaign was that it was so overwhelmingly clerical. That is not to forget the laymen among the teams, for they had left their jobs and came to work as part-time parsons. The Churches of London supported financially and in many other ways, but do not appear to have responded much to the appeal to all members to think of themselves as Christian Commandos. The witnessing was done for the most part by the specialist, and it was his isolated word in which trust was put, not the testimony of the life of the gathered congregation". Granting the nature of the campaign and the present state of the Churches, that was inevitable, but it indicates how vestigial and trivialized the corporate life and witness of the Church has become. Many of the laity, however, were stirred up by the campaign to a realization of their own inadequacy to give a reason for the faith that is in them, and one of its most useful by-products has been the preparatory week-end conferences which were organized for laymen.

THE PROBLEM OF INNER LONDON

Lastly, the London Commando Campaign had the very great merit of being bold and energetic enough to apprehend the teeming, confused mass called Greater London as a unity and to plan its strategy accordingly. This has drawn attention to the fact that London presents quite peculiar problems to the Churches to which nothing like enough thought has been given. We badly need a new Charles Booth who will give us a new Survey of the life of the London Churches. His findings will, no doubt, be surprising but we are sure that one fact will stand out. That will be the startling contrast in the condition of the churches as between middle-class and working-class areas and, in particular, as between the outer suburbs and that huge and growing circle roughly five miles in all directions from Charing Cross. This last fact is concealed by the presence within that circle of a few large and crowded churches of national reputation which draw a high proportion of their congregations from the outer suburbs and from visitors to London. Actually, this district, which encloses the centre of the nation's life and many of its most vigorous and influential inhabitants among its millions of

residents has an infinitesimal proportion of church members. What sort of results would we get if we could accurately compare the church-going proportion of the population in St. Pancras and Paddington with that in Purley or Wimbledon? The Commando Campaign appears to have made very little impression on this central area because its nature was such that it had to work from the bases provided by the local churches, and in this area the local churches are generally so weak that they were able to take very little part. What is needed in inner London is not a few day's Commando Campaign but a sustained effort, planned, financed and staffed by a permanent Commission of all the Churches and looking at least a generation ahead for solid results, to recapture the heart of England and the Commonwealth for the Christian faith from which its inhabitants have almost entirely departed.

THE CHRISTIAN FRONTIER COUNCIL

The last News-Letter, which was mainly devoted to a progress report on the work of the Christian Frontier Council, has brought a number of requests for further information, and some readers have generously offered to contribute to the fund which the Council is now raising in order to continue and expand its work. It is a great encouragement to the members of the Council and its officers to know that in the readers of the News-Letter they have friends who follow their efforts with interest and feel that they are associated, through the News-Letter, with the Council's work.

Four months ago the Frontier Council appointed to its staff Lieutenant-Commander A. J. Dain, who was then serving in the Indian Navy and held a post of responsibility at the India Office. He is now able to hand over his work at the India Office and takes up his duties with the Christian Frontier Council at the end of May.

The Council is primarily concerned with the work and witness of Christian laymen in their workaday callings and in their duties as citizens. Mr. Dain is a layman and it is his own conviction that a move forward along Frontier lines is a development of critical importance to the Church that has led him to accept the

invitation to join our venture. Mr. Dain, who is still in his early thirties, received his early training in the Merchant Navy and left it for pioneer missionary work in India. The war carried him first into a Gurkha regiment and then because of his seafaring experience into the Royal Indian Navy, where after interesting experience of the difficulties and important task of training young Indians of all castes and creeds as naval officers, he was put in charge of the selection of naval officers. Anybody who knows India will understand the particular qualities needed for a task of this kind, and his success in personal relationships and his administrative ability led to his appointment as Deputy Naval Liaison Officer to the Secretary of State for India. Both in India and at home Mr. Dain's spare time was devoted to Christian work and it was the realization, constantly driven home by his experience, of the inadequacy of the overlap between what men do in their working hours and the work of the Church to which they devote their spare time which convinced Mr. Dain before he ever discovered the Christian Frontier that some such effort as we are embarked upon was highly necessary. We hope that Mr. Dain's appointment will strengthen the links between the Frontier Council at the centre and local activities along Frontier lines.

THE SUPPLEMENT

The Supplement discusses a particular type of evangelism, the university mission, with special reference to the mission to Oxford University in the early spring of this year. It is the joint work of several participants in the preparation for and conduct of these missions.

Kathleen Bliss

THE MISSION TO OXFORD UNIVERSITY

YOUTH is the time for decision. By the time men and women are twenty-five most of them have either decided on, or been driven into, the work which will occupy most of the rest of their lives. Most of them have chosen their partner in marriage, and have formed habits of thought and ways of life which it may be possible to modify, but impossible except under immense outward pressure and with intense inward struggle radically and completely to change. If, therefore, Christ and his Gospel are to lay hold upon a man's life in such a way as to affect his outward conduct, his inward thoughts and his choice of what he does with his life, it is important that he should meet them in their fulness before he is twenty-five. Among the under twenty-fives in this country a small but growing minority are students in universities.¹ The effectiveness of the presentation of the Gospel to students is of vital importance, not only for those students themselves, but for the Church and for society into which they will pass as leaders of action and formers of opinion. The university mission is a type of evangelism worthy of special study, and the recent mission to Oxford University is as good an example as any upon which to concentrate.

CHANGING METHODS OF EVANGELISM

Missions to universities are not new. For fifty years or more there have been such missions—attempts on a large or a small scale by preachers and evangelists, working singly or in groups, to present the Christian Gospel to undergraduates with a view to winning or strengthening their allegiance to the Christian faith. But the task of the evangelist has undergone a great change in the last fifty years.

¹ The total number of university students in England, Scotland and Wales was (in round figures) 52,000 in July, 1946, and 65,000 in December, 1946. It is, of course, at present inflated by the large number of men and women returned from the services. But the Barlow committee on scientific manpower has recently recommended the doubling of the university population in a decade. Ed.

D. L. Moody, descending on the University of Oxford in the '90's, preached and spoke to large audiences every night for a week or more and left behind him several hundred young men who testified to the fact that they had been soundly converted. One sometimes hears the comment that Moody and other such evangelists "really did change men's lives". What is forgotten is that the majority of the students whom they addressed had been brought up in Christian homes, knew something about the Bible, were not unfamiliar with Christian vocabulary. The task of the evangelist was to give to what was known in a general way by the audience, a sudden decisive personal reference. It would be interesting to know what sort of effect, if any, Moody had upon that tiny minority in the university who had been brought up in the new scientific way of thinking, for whom the scientific attitude presented, not a few torturing doubts in a mind pre-disposed to be Christian, but a total way of looking at the world.

To-day it is not only unlikely, but impossible that such a mission should take place. Success or failure in a mission to the university depends in these days not on the shock tactics of the evangelist, but on the steady work of Christian agencies within which a university mission is an important incident. The real job in a university has to be done by the student organizations, by college chaplains, by local Churches and (most important of all) by the steady work of the members of staffs of universities, who in the regular course of their teaching keep the minds of students open to the possibility of belief. Unless these things are being done, no mission can be a success. This is much more clearly understood in the universities than it is in the parishes, where so many Christians are gulling themselves with the hope that a revival which will sweep thousands of men and women into the Churches may be round the next dark corner.

RECENT UNIVERSITY MISSIONS

There have been a number of university missions since the end of the war. If there is one conclusion to be drawn from them all it is that it is not the words of the missionary,

but the work of preparatory groups, the life and vigour of existing student communities on which success depends. Writing of the mission to London University organized by the Student Christian Movement in the autumn of last year, Robert Mackie says, "The old difficulty remained, that the words of the good news, however fresh and compelling, inadequately represented the mental language of the modern student, conditioned by his lectures and class reading".¹ Another observer remarked that there were few, if any, speakers over the age of forty who could make effective contact with young men and women under twenty-five.

In the London colleges the mission met with a varied reception. In some places it was nothing more than a damp squib; in others, says Robert Mackie, "the way in which certain S.C.M. groups challenged the accustomed ways of college life, took the discussion into the common rooms, and clashed with non-Christian forces in defence of the freedom of men to believe, was most striking". The audiences of 600 to 1,100 which attended the main meetings are not really very big from a university of 14,000 students.

Nor can it be said that the Cambridge mission held this spring touched any significant proportion of a student population of nearly 6,000 by attracting audiences of 450 or a little more to Great St. Mary's every night. Indeed, those who were competent to judge have some justification for thinking that the mission organized by the Inter-Varsity Fellowship in Cambridge in the preceding term had greater results. The college groups of the Cambridge Inter-Collegiate Christian Union² worked with determination. They made a dead set at the large body of medical students in the university, and they made a considerable dint. They brought a leading American Baptist to the country especially for the mission. These I.V.F. missions have a name in the Churches for being attempts to revive the good old days of

¹ *The Student World*, First Quarter, 1947. World's Student Christian Federation, Geneva.

² The Inter-Collegiate Christian Union (in London University the Inter-Faculty Christian Union) are evangelical in outlook and almost exclusively fundamentalist in their interpretation of the Bible. The Inter-Varsity Fellowship links together the Inter-Collegiate Christian Unions.

fighting evangelism and muscular Christianity with a strong emphasis on conversion, not despising the emotions, and the rigid interpretation of the authority of the Bible. In fact, there have been changes in the way in which this group presents its gospel which are worthy of careful consideration. It maintains its attitude of non-participation in missions conducted or organized by those who do not subscribe to the literal inerrancy of the Scriptures, but within its own confines is working towards a type of mission which is an intellectual exposition of Christianity.

THE MISSION TO OXFORD UNIVERSITY, FEBRUARY, 1947

No mission in any university has been so carefully planned, so consistently prepared for or so successfully carried through as that which was held at Oxford in February of this year. An account of what happened in Oxford is of interest not only because it is news of what Christians are trying to do about evangelism in a particular context, but because it has a moral for all Christians, namely, that men and women are not going to be won for the Christian cause unless Christians bestir themselves, not to spasmodic enthusiasm, but to sustained and disciplined effort.

In talking about evangelism Christians frequently divide it in their minds and in their speech into two stages, (1) conversion, (2) incorporating the converted person into the Church. This division can be seen on many pages of the *Report Towards the Conversion of England*. As has been pointed out in the News-Letter, Dr. George MacLeod of the Iona Community has been preaching in season and out of season that this is a false way of looking at evangelism, and that the true way is to see the two processes as one by making the congregation or the Christian fellowship *itself* an organ of evangelism. This principle justified itself completely in the mission to Oxford University.

Preparation. The preparation for the mission was seen chiefly as a process of preparing the Christians already in the university for participating in the mission. The mission was not a Student Christian Movement mission, nor indeed

did it bear any label. The Vicar of the University Church presided over a planning committee, consisting of representatives of the S.C.M., the denominational societies and one or two others. There was also a senior advisory committee, consisting of college and denominational chaplains. At an early date it was decided to have a single missionary to conduct the evening meetings, chosen for his ability to expound the faith to students and not primarily for his denominational allegiance. A large group of assistant missionaries to work in the colleges and at smaller meetings was chosen at an early date. The rest of the preparation concentrated on groups of Christians in the colleges. This was done because the colleges are the natural centres of community life in a residential university, and the shape of the mission was made to fit the ordinary life of the university.

The result of this preparation was that groups of Christian students came together in nearly every college. Some were members of the S.C.M., others belonged to denominational societies, some belonged to the Oxford University Church Union, others belonged to no organization, and a few belonged to the Oxford Inter-Collegiate Christian Union. Members of these groups undertook to attend daily prayers, and some held Compline or evening prayers in their college chapels. They also followed a specially prepared outline of Bible study called "Newness of Life". Every college group was visited by the Vicar of the University Church, and all were encouraged not to become little pietistic groups, but to reach out in advance of the mission to those who were not Christians. At least two chaplains had groups with agnostics on fundamental questions of the faith for two terms before the mission. The chief emphasis in preparation lay on prayer, and immensely valuable work was done to help students both by the printed word and by the work of prayer groups to understand something of the meaning of a praying community.

The Mission Itself. The main meetings were held in the Sheldonian Theatre at 8.15 every night for a week. The missionary, Bishop Stephen Neill, began without prelimin-

aries on the main subject, giving his listeners a very carefully reasoned, non-emotional but far from impersonal exposition of the faith. The total effect of this was very powerful. Students brought to the meeting the same attention which they would give to a closely argued thesis on any secular branch of knowledge in which they were particularly interested ; and more than this, there was, as one who was there remarked, a particular atmosphere of expectancy which could only be attributed to the prayers which had surrounded the mission since the moment when it was first conceived. After the address there was the singing of a hymn, three or four minutes more of more personal speaking and the reading of a few verses of the Bible.

There were two other main activities in connection with the mission. Four schools of prayer were held daily during the lunch hour and attended regularly by about 300 people (much in excess of expectation). At 5 p.m. every evening there was a question time meeting attended by 120-300 students, each devoted to a different subject—politics, science and religion, ethics and doctrine. These were varyingly successful. At the same time meetings were going on in the colleges ; interviews with assistant missionaries were arranged, and special meetings took place as they were needed. One meeting of special interest was for students of philosophy on the questions raised for Christians by logical positivism. It was attended by 200 students, and was not only successful in itself, but led to interesting further developments.

The Effect of the Mission. Nothing is more difficult than to assess the effects of such an evangelistic effort. A few things can, however, on the basis of fairly wide evidence be said with certainty. For a week the mission was the main topic of conversation everywhere in Oxford, and it was treated seriously. The numbers touched by the mission are genuinely impressive. The full strength of the university is 6,500. Even if the same 1,150 attended all meetings in the Sheldonian, more than one in six of Oxford students were reached by these meetings alone. The college meetings

reached others, and the proportion of students who actually heard a part of the message of the mission is more likely one in four.

It is perhaps worth saying that we should never become so intolerably pharisaic as to think that a mission to the university is to be judged solely by the number of non-Christians it attracted. To put it at a very low level, it is almost as important that the Christian undergraduate, who has often a very one-sided and distorted conception of his religion, should hear an authentic and balanced exposition of his faith. And, more profoundly, the Christian undergraduate is still *in via*, still himself a sinner, still so much a child of unfaith as well as of faith, that he needs to hear, as much as any other person, the good news of the Gospel.

Twenty assistant missionaries who lived for a week in the colleges and worked among the college groups reported that the students most affected by the big meetings were Christians and fringers, and there was a small and significant minority of agnostics and communists at the main meetings, among whom a certain number of conversions took place. One agnostic was heard to remark, "It took me two double whiskies to get over last night's meeting, but I am going again". For many students this was the first confrontal with Christianity as a total view of life, reasoned, sustained and worthy of the most serious consideration.

FOLLOW-UP

The follow-up of the mission is now taking place. A series of meetings on careers and the fulfilment of Christian vocation in them is being held. Two parallel movements have been strengthened by, as they helped to strengthen, the mission. One is the movement from the mass meeting held in the Town Hall in December "In Defence of Christian Standards in Public Life". The other is the Christian political movement which issued in the founding of vigorous bodies of Christian Socialists and Christian Conservatives. Faculty meetings on the relevance of Christianity to the total life of the university through faculty societies are being

held. Most important of all, the college Christian groups are active, for they are the enduring fellowships which alone can make the work of a mission permanently fruitful.

The mission has had the effect of clarifying the minds of at least some Christians on what are the next steps which Christians in the university need to take. One of them summarizes them thus: "(1) More of this individual missionary zeal, only let it be directed by grace! (2) More of the examination of the presuppositions which lie, often unquestioned, beneath the *Weltanschauungen* of non-Christian and professing Christian or doubtfully Christian people, and a careful thinking out of the places where these are to be called in question by Christians. That work of integration has begun, and is going on. (3) Christian action."

One last comment by the same correspondent should set all who care about evangelism thinking. He comments on the extreme rareness, even among fine men, of the ability "to see where people are, and without searing them, bring them to a decision". This bears out the opinion of one who took a major share in more than one of the University Missions here mentioned, that the Church "lacks a relevant doctrine of conversion".

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